

What now? Building Partnerships for Changing Refugee Ministry

SPEAKERS

Louisa Merchant, Allison Duvall, Twila Smith, Kendall Martin

Allison Duvall 00:10

Why do you support refugees?

00:12

I support refugees because my family were refugees.

00:15

I support refugees because we are all God's children and we all deserve a safe place to grow in God's love.

00:21

I support refugees because God made us all in God's image.

00:25

I support refugees because I'm a legal guardian of a minor asylee named Carol from Burundi.

00:32

I support refugees because my Lord was a refugee.

00:36

Because I welcome and I love my neighbor.

Kendall Martin 00:40

Hi, and welcome to Hometown, a podcast from Episcopal Migration Ministries. I'm Kendall Martin.

Allison Duvall 00:46

And I'm Allison Duvall. We're coming to you today with an in-between seasons episode.

Kendall Martin 00:51

Today's episode is the recording from a recent virtual workshop called What Now? Building Partnerships for Changing Refugee Ministry.

Allison Duvall 00:59

Unlike the webinars that we've previously shared with you in this in-between season series, this virtual workshop was an interactive learning event for Partners in Welcome members and others to gather together with a practitioner and an expert, who were conversation facilitators. And what they did in the virtual workshop was learn from one and another, share best practices and ideas, and were in dialogue around the common theme of how we build partnerships in a refugee ministry environment that is changing almost by the day.

Kendall Martin 01:29

And we must say that we are so very grateful to our presenters on this workshop, Reverend Twila Smith and Louisa Merchant for so generously hosting the conversation. Both Twila and Louisa bring unique perspectives from the point of view of congregational ministries of welcome.

Allison Duvall 01:43

Out of respect to the participants who were there for the workshop, we will not be sharing the conversation and dialogue that they had. But what we will do is share with you key ideas and takeaways that we heard during the gathering.

Kendall Martin 01:55

Thank you for joining us.

Allison Duvall 02:01

We're so very grateful to our presenters today, the Reverend Twila Smith and Louisa Merchant for so generously hosting this conversation, and Twila if you'll open us in prayer.

Twila Smith 02:14

God be with you. Oh God whose love never fails. We ask for your presence to be with refugees around the world. Give wisdom and compassion to those in positions of power, that their decisions may bring people to safety and hasten peace. In our calling to love our neighbors and serve people in need, especially in this time of change and despair, grant us unwavering faith and courage. Today, help us listen with one another and hear you. Equip and empower us to be witnesses to your love as advocates and servants, as ministers of hope. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Allison Duvall 03:04

Thank you Twila and we assume that if you're attending today's workshop that you already understand what the legal definition of refugee means, and what refugee resettlement is and why it how it occurs. However, if in the next few slides you hear information for which you need greater context or in the conversations today, if you hear information that needs a little bit more foundation, I encourage you to view the recording of our recent webinar, Episcopal Migration Ministries and Episcopal Public Policy Network Refugee Program Update. The way that you would access this is by going to our website, episcopalmigrationministries.org and clicking on the login button. There you would log into your Partners in Welcome account or you request to create an account. Once you've logged in a new drop down menu item called Member Resources appears and under that drop down, you hover over Resources and then click on Webinars. Once on the webinars page, click the EMM EPPN Refugee

Program Update link, and that will lead you to a page with follow up resources from that webinar, including the video.

Allison Duvall 04:15

So just for today to provide a brief status update. I will share simply that under the Trump administration, the 40 year US Refugee Admissions Program has seen drastic and devastating changes affecting thousands of refugee families lives, communities and the organizations that serve refugees. Both formal resettlement affiliate offices as well as community groups and congregations, who have welcomed refugees for decades as neighbors and as friends. And this brings us to the reason for today's virtual workshop: to discuss the question that has been on so many hearts and minds. What now? Now that there are so few refugee families arriving, so many families that have been separated due to the resettlement policies of this administration. What do we do? How do we build community partnerships in the midst of these drastic changes, and the effects that they have on people's lives? I'm so grateful to each of you for joining today. And so glad that this event has brought together participants who are refugee resettlement professionals, alongside members of communities who direct or participate in or are launching locally led community organizations or congregational ministries, to welcome refugees and other newcomers. So I'm going to turn it over to Twila now to ask our first discussion question for our participants.

Twila Smith 05:46

Thank you, Allison, as Louisa and I began holding some questions about the what now and about changes and resettlement, one of the first ones that we had was how it's actually affecting people who are already here, because we'd both seen that in the areas that we'd worked in and it's a real curiosity, I think with us to hear from all of you, how you've seen that the changes in policies, the changes in how resettlement is working now, affecting refugees who are already in your communities. And so we'd like to begin just by hearing your responses to that. And that way, we'll, we'll get some voices in the room to hear what your experiences are.

Allison Duvall 06:33

So one of the things that we heard from participants at this point in the dialogue was that there's just this increased anxiety and fear and their communities and it's not just the people who have already been resettled to the United States, but it's also for their family members who are overseas and because of what's been going on, there's little to no chance that they'll be coming anytime soon. So, what's so devastating, kind of part of the human toll of what's happening with these policy changes is kind of this emotional and spiritual toll. In a way, it's it's leading to this hopelessness for families who are here who are just yearning to be reunited with their families abroad.

Kendall Martin 07:21

Yes, it struck me that a quite a few of the participants were talking about how they were hearing from so many people who are separated from their family members, with no indication of when they will be together again. And I also noted that folks expressed the effects of the increase that we've seen in divisive and hateful rhetoric against refugees and immigrants. And one of the side effects of that they've seen an increase in bullying in school against refugee children. There's been an increase in hate crimes in their community. So these are all big things of concern for them.

Twila Smith 07:52

One of the things that we know from the stories of arriving refugees is the change and the uncertainty that has shaped their lives, defined their journeys. Many tell of holding on to the dream that their children will be able to live in safety, thrive in school, to have a good future, and of how they're willing to take a risk to go to a place they did not know to begin a new life they can barely imagine. So it seems appropriate that ministry to support refugees might begin with a dream, a dream of reaching out to neighbors, of greater openness and welcome, and that it might begin with uncertainty, a path that's not at all clear a leap of faith, which we can quickly see pale in comparison with that of our neighbors who have traveled so very far. And that it might begin to grow a ministry that we could not imagine and take us to places of spiritual journey that we could not expect to go.

Twila Smith 09:00

As we talk about changes in refugee resettlement and ministry, I've been asked to introduce you to one parish's refugee ministry, the Refugee Community Center at Episcopal Church of the Mediator in Allentown. And as Maria said, I am no longer at that church, I began a new ministry in the Diocese of Western New York in Buffalo at St. Simon's Episcopal Church and the Genesis Community Center, and have been working with refugees in Buffalo now as well, but specifically about the Refugee Community Center in Allentown. I think had it begun a few years earlier, had we started with a desire to help refugees, had we approached a local resettlement agency and asked to get involved, the option likely would have been to sponsor a family or hold collection drives for items that were needed. Instead, the groundwork began with getting to know a neighborhood and a community, of understanding needs and trying to inspire church members toward more hands-on-service. There were a few dedicated parishioners who kept hoping and praying that there was a way to serve locally that could engage and energize the church and the neighborhood. And there were a lot of one on one conversations, neighbors and nonprofit staffs in the area, listening for what God was already up to in our midst. Eventually, there was a dream that came from a church from outside the church that I think landed on fertile soil. So there was a brief literacy project that turned into a book drive for Arabic/English children's books in September of 2015. And less than six months later, we were planning a community center for our refugee neighbors. Within six months after that the church basement had been transformed and the resettlement agency we'd been working with had already shifted to a new service provider. So change was part of the beginning. The center was dedicated. And we began to meet neighbors from Syria, Sudan, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and more who walked to our church.

Twila Smith 11:20

Change seemed constant for our neighbors and for us, and a new ministry was emerging and all of that. For all the desire we talked about in the church around being disciples and living more fully into our baptismal vows, we honestly didn't think we had enough interested people to handle sponsoring a family. But here we were with a community center that was filled with sometimes raucous activity, laughter and learning and craft projects and lots of good food and conversation, sometimes mixing five or six languages at a time. And donations poured in. People from all over the community showed up to help. And if we had started with a plan for meeting a specific need, I don't think it would have looked at the same at all. We'd started more I think in a place, a place in our hearts, but also a place in our neighborhood, the place where God had planted us for mission a long time ago. We started with

that desire to be disciples and to express God's love in tangible ways. Jesus said, "Let me give you a new command: love one another. In the same way I loved you, love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples, when they see the love you have for each other." Love sounds so simple, but what shape does it take for the church so that others might recognize it and receive it? Part of the vision for the Refugee Community Center was formed by conversations around widening our welcome. And the vision took shape in a way for the church to witness to God's expansive love, extending welcome to refugees who were new to the parish neighborhood and offering space in the church, in the church building. And also in our lives.

Twila Smith 13:24

From the start, there was a need for English classes, ESL classes, and that became an anchor of the center's programming. But even there, the approach was definitely relational. We quickly realized that we needed a provision for children in order for mothers to attend class. And that turned into what I think was a first rate preschool thanks to talented volunteers, including retired school teachers, mothers and grandmothers, and a pediatrician, because we wanted the kids to thrive. As more volunteers came along and with creative and gifted ESL instructors, we were able to supplement group class time with lots of one on one support. And in that, relationships deepened. From the start, we emphasized I think making connections, individually and with groups, for life-giving relationships, prioritizing the relationships over collections and programs. We weren't trying to fit people into our framework, instead striving to see the gifts and hopes that people were bringing to the table. Often when people tried to give us donations that we couldn't immediately use, we would say we need as much room as possible for the people because that's what this is about. Gradually, I think we learned to trust that simply making room to be together is transformative. Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. For by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Twila Smith 15:03

For the first few months, we found a niche and welcoming new arrivals often seeing families within days of landing in the US. We learned how to do that. And it felt like we were entertaining angels. It also felt like we were doing something really good. Then the arrivals began to decline. And I think mutual love grew. Because for all the difficult things about the reduced number of arrivals, we realized we had more time to get to know people better, to listen to stories, to savor relationships. And I think over time, our role began to change as witnesses to holy hope. Part of it was learning to see the good that was already happening in our local community and the values we shared in common, and then to pivot with new opportunities as they opened, like working with a local business and encouraging individuals to sponsor school uniforms to meet the needs of growing kids and facilitating the connection with a local youth soccer league. Encouraging volunteers so they can help our neighbors navigate parent teacher conferences and job applications and apartment leases and getting local programs involved to support wellness and early childhood education. I think the deeper change was learning to hold our own efforts loosely and recognize the new work that God was up to in and through us. One day last year as the numbers of arrivals were already in sharp decline, and our political climate was getting even more worrisome, I heard some muffled voices over in our children's area after I thought everyone had gone home. And I looked over and I saw a group of volunteers. There was a church member and several people from the community and they were all sitting around the children's table in those tiny children's chairs, and they were encouraging one another. In our efforts to be a welcoming place for people

coming to our neighborhood from around the world. God had been building a sanctuary of love and hope, a place of refuge for all of us.

Allison Duvall 17:23

Thank you so much Twila I love so many of the stories I'm privileged to hear from across the Episcopal Church and from our affiliate partners who partner with community groups is when there are places like the Refugee Community Center that creates space, not for more programs or more services, although those are vital and very much needed, but also just places to build and be in community, especially in this time when there's such a dearth of hope and part of how we rekindle it and keep that flame alive is through relationships with one another and being with our neighbors. So I'm deeply grateful to you for sharing that story. We're going to transition now into another part of the dialogue of today's meeting. So let's turn the baton over to Louisa to ask the next question to which we've asked participants to prepare a response. So Louisa, over to you.

Louisa Merchant 18:15

Hi, everyone. Thank you so much for coming today. It's really amazing to be in your company with your incredible skills and offerings in this area. And we're going to be talking about how how we, for those of you all who have come from traditional co-sponsorship models, which All Saints Refugee Ministries where I work in Atlanta, Georgia, definitely it comes from like the traditional co-sponsorship model, y'all know and are experienced, with the idea that the needs of new arrivals can be very different from the needs of families that have been here for three to five years. And perhaps you and your parishes or your organizations may have been focused more on new arrivals in the past, and now are looking towards working more closely with people who have been here longer. Can you talk to us about how these are different phenomena, how your services and and your relationships may be different?

Allison Duvall 19:19

One of the things we heard from participants is that a lot of people are trying to take a really terrible situation and make the best of it. The terrible situation is that there are devastatingly low refugee arrivals, even though our country has so much capacity and communities to welcome more refugees. But the kind of taking lemons and making lemonade that local refugee resettlement affiliates as well as just ministries that welcome refugees, the lemonade they've made is that it's given them some space and time to really dig into their communities and get a better sense of what is happening and what refugees need, the longer that they're here, so much of refugee resettlement work is focused on the first three to six to nine months to a year. But what's happening now, participants seem to really use this time to further explore what people's needs are, after they've been here for three to five years.

Kendall Martin 20:24

Yes and they have also taken this time and space to have an increased focus on youth. So they're developing more programs, whether that's sports or after school activities, but they're really focusing on how to engage and integrate youth into their communities.

Allison Duvall 20:39

The other thing that I thought was really wonderful to hear was that these groups, they were congregations and also resettlement agencies, were working even more intentionally to make sure that voices from the refugee community were being amplified and supported.

Kendall Martin 20:57

Absolutely and there's a focus on making sure that refugees are represented in the dialogues around what's working and what isn't programmatically and also assessing what communities need to be better at.

Allison Duvall 21:08

Another theme was was around partnering with local resettlement agencies to offer employment support. So this was really an idea coming from the faith-based organizations and congregations that we were hearing from on the call. But there's been this effort to reach out to local resettlement agencies really to work together, offering things like mentoring sessions and helping people connect around a wide range of employment sectors, matching professionals here in the US with folks who are professionals back in their home countries and helping them get relicensed and recertified. I thought that was awesome.

Kendall Martin 21:45

Yes, exactly. So vocational training and education about credit and homeownership. And those are such fundamentally important things to offer newcomers. And I also heard quite a few participants talk about financial literacy and better employment options. So those are definitely areas that ministries can step in.

Allison Duvall 22:02

Yeah. And that brings to my memory, Kendall, there was also such good discussion about specialized programs for women. And that developing programs in partnership with immigrant and refugee-serving organizations to meet the unique needs of women is a gap that often needs to be filled and that congregations can kind of step into that role in partnership with local organizations.

Louisa Merchant 22:25

So when Twila and I were talking, we realized that we kind of have like an opposite trajectory of parish experience, in Atlanta and Allentown. And that in Allentown, the thoughts and planning that went into eventually create the Refugee Center wasn't necessarily going to be a refugee center. And for that reason, all of these creative amazing things happened, which is really inspiring. All Saints is like at the opposite end and that we like and I'm going to explain briefly how All Saints' refugee ministries came to be. But we were always like traditional traditional co-sponsorship and relationship with a agency. So now that the numbers have fallen, now we're in this period of like, Oh my gosh, what do we do now? Where can we go from here? So just briefly to explain how how it got started here at All Saints, and the theme of the talk is also how daring is good, and how spontaneity and letting yourself you know be open to new things is really important right here. Barbara Thompson is this lady in the picture right here with red hair, in 1994 she got on a plane--she was a writer who was contracted for a book about child survivors of war. She's also an All Saints parishioner. She got on a plane in the middle of the Bosnian War and flew into a conflict zone. And then when she came back. She had been so inspired and

transformed by that experience, that she started getting really involved with Bosnian refugees. And those relationships became so important and life giving that the church hired a position in 1994 a part-time position to help facilitate those relationships. And then that position was eventually made full-time in 2016, showing a renewed and enhanced commitment on the part of the parish. We now work with 50 families at a time from the Middle East East and Central Africa, Burma, and Nepal. And a lot of what we've done and in addition to the traditional co-sponsorship is children's ministries because pretty much all of the parents that we work with work in chicken plants, and the chicken plants are at least an hour away sometimes longer from their homes. So as all of you all know what that the that what that leads to in familial relationships in terms of the exhaustion and the lack of access and, and the the difficulties that that kind of work and, and the physically demanding nature that work causes.

Louisa Merchant 25:15

So because I work for a large church, it's about a 3000 member church in Atlanta, and we had a partnership with an agency, we never really came out of our silo. We didn't we didn't really build community partnerships historically, because in a way we didn't really need to. We could be self-sustaining. But now, this year with the news that our agency's flights had been canceled in September, which is the time that we usually do traditional co-sponsorship. It became very obvious that like our normal way of doing things wasn't going to work. And quite honestly, we were really thrown and did not know how to proceed. So we attended a national event some of y'all may have attended this event in your area it's called Rise for Refuge. And during that event, we were asked to step out of our comfort zone and to try something new to respond to the current situation. So we created a consortium of seven Episcopal churches to come together, which is also kind of new, we hadn't done that in other areas. And at one meeting plan for advocacy events that ended up creating about 500 postcards in addition to a, an honoring ceremony for an agency that unfortunately closed as a result of what's going on in the federal situation. That is, that is World Relief Atlanta, their offices closed very recently. So we're struggling where we're very concerned about the loss of services to people who are already here. And frankly, that can feel really really emotionally overwhelming. We've talked about how this is emotionally overwhelming for our families who feel you know, who experienced racism and classism and xenophobia on a daily basis. And they're and they're in fear for their families that they're not with right now. Well, it also affects the service providers and the volunteers who can feel super overwhelmed and think, Oh my gosh, you know, more services are going to be lost. really super important things that volunteers don't necessarily know how to do, like help with food stamps and Medicaid or employment. And now as you know, it can be immobilizing for communities of of people of churches that want to give support to say like, we can't do what we've always been doing. We don't know where to go there. The needs are overwhelming, but we can't stop there. Every every act of outreach matters.

Louisa Merchant 27:59

So we kind of at All Saints got thrown into a couple things, if you call it that, really it's the work of the Lord. The Lord does provide the way. When you're lost in the wilderness and not sure what to do and and we can be shy, we can be intimidated, we can be scared to reach out to new people. Fortunately, the YMCA reached out to us, and they had some money to give free swimming lessons to refugee children, but they didn't have they hadn't really found a good path for dealing with obstacles like language barriers and transportation. So we agreed to facilitate those swimming lessons, which were amazing. But something kind of surprising came out of that. Since those those lessons were very

successful, they had gotten a grant to provide Islamic swimming lessons, which is like in a gender separate environment after the Y had closed to non-refugee Muslim women and girls who I'd never been in the water before because of religious or cultural reasons. So we stepped out of our element to facilitate those lessons because we'd had some success in creating a partnership around refugees. We would never have reached into the non-refugee Muslim community if this hadn't happened. And for 30 seats that we had for lessons, we had over 250 requests from the Islamic community, which just went to go show that, you know, people who experienced Islamophobia on a daily basis to have a nationally recognized organization like the YMCA, just offer these programs was healing for Muslim women and girls to know, I really like, people suffer so much oppression, they even just a come into a sort of, you know, mainstream functions or organizations is a really big deal. And it can be a really healing experience. And these are the kinds of things that we can do now and provide now in spite of and must do and provide now during these incredibly difficult times.

Louisa Merchant 30:08

So another example though my last example of unexpectedness, and trying to get out of our, our comfort zones and out of our siloed boxes is when we created that advocacy group with the seven Episcopal churches originally it was right before the refugee cap happened, the 18,000 that got set. And we didn't know what we knew that we were going to do events to try to say no to the zero potential zero cap and no to the 18,000 cap. But we didn't really and we still don't, by the way, we still don't know what we're doing. It's a process. We're working on it. But we knew that, alright we brought these people together. What are we going to do now? And a lot of churches have been divided on the issue of like asylum versus refugee resettlement like I would call people to say hi, do you want participate in, you know, advocacy for refugee resettlement, and they say, well, we would love to, but we're really tapped out with what we're doing with asylum and the Southern border, and we just don't feel like that we can take that on. I totally understand that I, I speak Spanish, I care about asylum issues. But when people would come to me and say, Hey, can you help with an asylum issue? I'd be like, hoo! I'm really overwhelmed with the refugee resettlement, like that's all I can I gotta stay in my lane. Well, that has to come to an end. And so you know, now is the time that we're looking at bringing asylum and Southern border issues into the refugee resettlement advocacy consortium because we need to work on these issues together, not separate. They get pitted against each other. Everybody in this program knows that one of the main things that the government said about trying to shut down the refugee resettlement program was that you know, we can't afford it because We have so many backlogged asylum cases. So we have to take that funding from the resettlement program and put it in the asylum cases. And that's actually not true. So it's important to like, really get together on these issues and look at how the common, we're all working from the same problem. And the needs the similar solution, so now's not the time to be separated. And it kind of means taking a leap of faith, which is the last screen that I have. Because it's it's easy to feel it is it's easy to feel hopeless. It's easy to feel overwhelmed. It's easy to feel paralyzed by fear for the families for our organizations. And it's easy to feel like Oh, I can't get into this other topic because it's it's I can't take on non-refugee Muslims or I can't take on asylum seekers because this is my my lane. But I think when we have faith and we believe that God will provide what we need, these kinds of risks that we're taking can be incredibly beneficial and healing right now more than ever.

Allison Duvall 33:09

Thank you so much, Louisa. So I'm happy that we're now going into another dialogue part of today. What's one idea you've heard today that has inspired you or giving you hope?

Kendall Martin 33:23

So Allison, I really enjoyed hearing from participants where they found hope or new ideas out of engaging in this conversation?

Allison Duvall 33:30

Me too. I don't know what I expected because so much of what we were talking about was kind of just sobering. What's been happening the last two years has been three years now has just been so challenging, but it was so encouraging to hear that people were grateful to have a space to come together to share stories of their ministries, to find common ground and to just feel supported to feel like they weren't alone.

Kendall Martin 33:55

Yes, and it certainly gave them new ideas for how to further serve those in the community and I really appreciated that.

Allison Duvall 34:00

One thing people responded to was the newfound hope they found, like you said for sharing these ideas, common concerns and opportunities. And there was a definite hunger for this continued kind of dialogue for those who are involved in this ministry of welcome or people who want to get involved.

Kendall Martin 34:16

And I think a major takeaway was the way our ministries can grow and change as a result of engaging with others across the church. It just really creates a space and an opportunity to think outside the box and envision something new and different.

Allison Duvall 34:27

I'm excited about the possibilities of hosting more conversations like this in 2020. And even hosting conversations that are even more topically or thematically focused on developing ministries for youth or for women, different ways that congregations can take the first steps to get more involved in this ministry of welcome.

Allison Duvall 34:48

I'll turn it over to Twila to close us today in prayer.

Twila Smith 34:52

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we give you thanks for bringing us together today and for the holy hope you stir up among us. Send us your spirit as we continue in ministries of loving and caring for refugees, equip us for the good of our neighbors and give us grace to work together in common purpose, to transform and to be transformed in the communities where we are. And to not forget those still yearning for a safe place to call home. All this we ask through Jesus Christ, our Savior and true hope. Amen.

Allison Duvall 35:34

Thank you all so much for being with us today. Thank you and take care, stay warm, and go in hope. Bye bye.

Kendall Martin 35:47

Thank you for joining us today. We invite you to join us this Advent for weekly podcast reflections from both lay and clergy leaders across the church. The reflections will also be available on the EMM blog.

Allison Duvall 35:58

Join in the work of welcome by making a donation to Episcopal Migration Ministries, no gift is too small and all are put to use to welcome our newest neighbors. Visit episcopalmigrationministries.org/give or text Hometown to 91999.

Kendall Martin 36:14

Our theme song composer is Abraham Mwindi Icando. Find his music at abrahammwindi.bandcamp.com.

Allison Duvall 36:21

Thank you for joining us today listeners. Until next time, peace be with you and all those you consider home.